Can Man Discover the Future?

From Current Opinion.

In an illuminating essay, first read before the Royal Institution of London and now published in this county ("The Discovery of the Future," published by B. W. Heubsch), H. G. Wells considers the question how far our present ignorance of the future is justifiable, a fixed and necessary condition of human life. Is man as we know him final? And what is to come after man? Would not some knowledge of the future greatly benefit human life today and accelerate our progress toward a higher culture? Mr. Wells is so possessed by the fascinations of his subject that he forgets for the time being his usual complexities and gives a clear, brief statement of his wonderful and startling thought.

He believes that along certain lines and with certain qualifications and limitations, a working knowledge of the future is humanly possible. We overestimate, he says, our certainty regarding the past, and underestimate the certainties of the future. The knowledge of the past possessed by the educated man of today is not all of the same kind, and it is derived from three different sources, personal memory, recorded history and modern science. Examining these sources, Mr. Wells writes:

"First of all he has the realest of all knowledge—the knowledge of his own personal experiences, his memory. Uneducated people believe their memories absolutely, and most educated people believe them with a few reservations. Some of us take up a critical attitude even toward our own memories; we know that they not only sometimes drop things out, but that sometimes a sort of dreaming or a strong suggestion will put things in. But for all that memory remains vivid and real as no other knowledge can be, and to have seen and heard and felt is to be nearest to absolute conviction. Yet our memory of direct impressions is only the smallest part of what we know. Outside that bright area comes knowledge of a different order—the knowledge brought us by other people. Outside our immediate personal memory there comes this wider area of facts or quasi facts told us by more or less worthy people, told us by word of mouth or by the written word of living and of dead writers. This is the past of report, rumor, tradition and history—the second sort of knowledge of the past. The nearer knowledge of this sort is abundant and clear and detailed, remoter it becomes vaguer, still more remotely in time and space it dies down to brief, imperfect instriptions and enigmatical traditions and at last dies away, so far as the records and traditions of humanity go, into doubt and darkness as blank, just as blank, as futurity."

To these two limits, Mr. Wells continues, the educated man's knowledge of the past was confined, save for a few "inklings and guesses," until the beginning of the nineteenth century, which marked the great discovery of the inductive past. Before then, man was as certain of the non-existence of anything before the world's creation (about 4004 B. C., according to one ecclesiastical authority) as most of us are still concerning the non-existence of the future. But modern science, that "relentless systematic criticism of phenomena," to quote Mr. Wells, "has in the past hundred years absolutely destroyed the conception of a finitely distant beginning of things: has abolished such limits to the past as a dated creation set, and added an enormous vista to that limited sixteenth century outlook." It has provided us not only with a new kind of knowledge, but, what is of immense importance, a knowledge obtained in a new kind of way. If man has discovered an inductive past, why can he not discover an inductive future? Mr. Wells insists further:

"If it has been possible for men by picking out a number of suggestive and significant looking things in the present, by comparing them, criticising them, and discussing them, with a perpetual insistence upon 'Why?' without any guiding tradition, and indeed in the teeth of established beliefs, to construct this amazing searchlight of inference into the remoter past, is it really, after all, such an extravagant and hopeless thing to suggest that, seeking for operating causes instead of for fossils, and by criticising them as persistently and thoroughly as the geological record has been criticised, it may be possible to throw a searchlight of inference forward instead of backward and to attain to a knowledge of coming things as clear, as universally convincing and infinitely more important to mankind than the clear vision of the past that geology has opened to use during the nineteenth century?"

Granting that anything having the same relation to the future that man's memory has to the past is out of the question, Mr. Wells yet holds to his faith. "I believe," he affirms, "that the time is drawing near when it will be possible to suggest a systematic exploration of the future. And you must not judge the practicability of this enterprise by the failures of the past. So far nothing has been attempted, so far no first-class mind has ever focused itself upon these issues; but suppose the laws of social and political development, for example, were given as many brains, were given as much attention, criticism and discussion as we have given the laws of chemical combination during the last fifty years, what might we not expect?"

The popular idea of scientific investigation, Mr. Wells goes on to say, is a vehement, aimless collection of little facts out of which, in an accidental or miraculous way, certain marketable conjuring tricks—the "wonders of science"—emerge. The popular conception of discovery is accident. But scientific men know differently. They know that the essential thing is the analysis of facts, not their collection; and that the aim and test, the justification of science, is prophesy. To quote at length:

"Until a scientific theory yields confident forecasts you know it is unsound and tentative; it is mere theorizing, as evanescent as art talk of the phantoms politicians talk about. The splendid body of gravitational astronomy, for example, establishes itself upon the certain forecast of stellar movements, and you would absolutely refuse to believe its amazing assertions if it were not for these same unerring forecasts. . . . And if I am right in saying that science aims at prophecy, and if the specialist in each science is in fact doing his best now to prophesy within the limits of his field, what is there to stand in the way of our building up this growing body of forecast into an ordered picture of the future that will be just as certain, and perhaps just as detailed as the picture that has been built up within the last hundred years of the geological past?"

Until we bring prophecy down to the affairs of man and his children, Mr. Wells asserts, it is just as possible to carry inductive reasoning forward as backward. Why should it stop at man? Is man, then, individually and collectively, so much more incalculable than the other forces of nature? A new element which entirely changes the course of scientific inquiry and prophecy? Or does his presence only complicate and not alter the process of induction? How far may we reasonably hope through scientific analysis to discover our future? Much farther, in Mr. Wells' opinion, than most of us at present are inclined to admit. "I believe," he declares, "that the deliberate direction of historical and social study toward the future and an increasing reference, a deliberate and courageous reference, to the future in moral and religious discussion, would be enormously stimulating and enormously profitable to our intel-

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